



## **Officer Jerome Perkins**

Oral History Transcription

March 4, 2003 [Side A]

Interviewed by:	David Healey
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Summary:	Officer Jerome Perkins shares his experiences being among the first African American police officers in South Bend in the 1950s through the 1970s. Additionally, he talks about the riots in South Bend, working for Studebaker, and how the civil rights movement unfolded in this city.

0:00:08 [David Healey] Today is March 4, 2003. I'm with Officer Perkins. He is a past officer in the South Bend Police Department. He is also a retired U.S. Marshal. We are interviewing him today. He is going to talk about what he remembers about being a police officer here in South Bend during his tenure.

[DH] Officer Perkins, when were you actually a police officer for South Bend? What were the dates?

[JP] August 15, 1952 through August 15, 1972.

[DH] So, you were at the height of the civil rights movement right here in South Bend. When did you become a U.S. Marshal?

[JP] 1981. November 1981.

[DH] And your jurisdiction was here in South Bend?

[JP] The entire northern district of Indiana. It started with the borderline of Illinois, and went south through Indiana to Lafayette.

[DH] Okay. Now, were you... Are you a native of South Bend?

[JP] Yes, I am.

[DH] Your parents came from... Were they born here also?

[JP] No. My mother was born in Kentucky. My dad, in California.

[DH] So, they came to South Bend, do you remember the date?

[JP] No, I really don't.

0:01:42 [DH] So, you were raised here in South Bend. Do you remember what street you were raised on? Where the home was?

[JP] William Street. 409 South William Street. I lived there until I turned fifteen, and we then moved 1227 Sorin Street, which is right around the corner.

[DH] So you've been right here in this same neighborhood?

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] Your father worked at... Where did he work at?

[JP] He originally worked at Bill Nickel's Buick Dealership. Later on, he got into the promotional field and he booked dances to come into South Bend.

[DH] Oh, so he was like a manager of sorts?

[JP] Yes, and they had the dances at the Palais Royal. That's what they just finished renovating... a lot of years.

[DH] So you're very familiar with Palais Royal, then. Do you remember any of the groups your father brought into the area?

[JP] Uh, yeah... I should have written all this down.

[DH] Well, he was a facilitator of bringing people in... musicians... to the Palais Royal?

[JP] Anyone who was popular at that time, he brought them in here.

0:03:10 [DH] So, it must have been like Count Basie and that group of entertainers?

[JP] (interjects something—inaudible)

[DH] So, you had an exciting childhood?

[JP] Yes.

[DH] And you must have met all these people?

[JP] Each one of them that I was old enough to remember, you know.

[DH] What did your mother... Did she stay at home? Or did she work outside the home?

[JP] She did housework. She worked for wealthy people who lived in Twyckenham Hills.

0:03:40 [DH] So she worked as a domestic?

[JP] Yeah, and then she left that and started working at Milady Shop, which was famous in South Bend for selling women's clothes.

[DH] And they were downtown South Bend?

[JP] Yes.

[DH] That must have been... Do you remember the year that she worked there? Must have been...

[JP] Oh, boy. That was in the '50s that she started that. Yeah.

[DH] Did you have any brothers and sisters?

[JP] No.

[DH] You're an only child?

[JP] Yes.

[DH] Okay. So where did you go to high school or junior high at?

[JP] South Bend Central.

[DH] You graduated from Central?

[JP] Uh huh.

0:04:33 [DH] And... so you were there during the glory years—when they won the basketball championship...

[JP] It was before that...

[DH] Before that.

[JP] Uh huh. They did that... I can't remember.

[DH] I think it was '54. '53 or '54.

[JP] That sounds right. Yeah. I graduated in '47.

[DH] Just after World War II.

[JP] Uh huh.

[DH] Can you tell me, when you were in high school, did you have any African American teachers when you were in high school?

[JP] Did I?

[DH] Yes.

[JP] No.

[DH] No. Okay. No African American teachers that taught you. Were you encouraged to go to college during your stay at Central? Did you have any counselors that helped you go to college?

0:05:26 [JP] No. We had counselors, but they never really harped on going to college. They counseled us there at the high school. And that was about the extent of it. Our desire came from outsiders—some of them being born and raised in the South and eventually moved here, and they told us the benefits of having a college education. Some of us went, some of us didn't.

[DH] And you chose to go?

[JP] Very briefly.

[DH] And where did you attend?

[JP] Howard University.

[DH] Okay. That's a very good school. So, what did you do? So, you attended Howard. Did you come back to South Bend right away?

[JP] I did. Yes.

[DH] What did you do then?

0:06:26 [JP] I worked at the Studebaker Corporation—auto dealers and manufacturers. And I stayed there until I joined the South Bend Police Department in 1952.

[DH] So you didn't work for Studebaker... like you worked for their dealership? You sold cars?

[JP] The factory.

[DH] The factory, worked at the factory. Do you remember what you did at the factory?

[JP] I had a job that they called the extra board job. In fact, I was so new there, they didn't have seniority. So, the extra board, you learned just about every phase of the manufactureship. When someone called in sick, you replaced them for that day on the job. That's why they called you the extra board man.

[DH] So, you did it all—you went wherever they needed you...

[JP] Yeah, wherever they sent me.

[DH] Okay. Well that must have been pretty interesting job then.

0:07:32 [JP] It sure was. It was hectic, too. You know, you didn't have any knowledge of how the bolts and screws took care of the car. You had to learn as you went along.

[DH] When you joined the South Bend Police Department, how many other African American police officers were there?

[JP] Uh... There was Bob Watts, Al Pope, Ernie Rice... and that was it.

[DH] I've got a picture of Officer Watts and Officer Pope. What were they like? They preceded you... Did they give you any advice?

0:08:20 [JP] Yeah. Not so much... yeah well, both of them did. Bob Watts had shared with me some of his experiences. He had been the first black police officer. He told me what a lonesome job it was. Because, you know, many of his brother officers didn't desire to meet and greet with him. Al Pope came along, and after a number of years he eventually became a detective sergeant. He knew so many people, so many of the youngsters in town and did such a good job that they promoted him. Then, Ernie Rice came along after Al Pope, and after a number of years, he was promoted. Then, 1952, I came along, and followed the same gamut. I was promoted after quite a few years on the department.

0:09:38 [DH] Now, as a side bar here, in other interviews, I've heard that in the early days, that black police officers could not arrest a white man... that

they had to hold him and wait for a white police officer to arrest him. Did you hear stories like that?

[JP] I heard stories like that. But it wasn't that way when I went on.

[DH] So, how... Can you tell me, do you remember how you got on the police department?

[JP] Not other than the fact that it was... it had political overtures to it. The administration that was in office then decided they needed another black police officer.

[DH] And that would be what administration? Who was the mayor then?

[JP] Hmm...

0:10:48 [DH] It was 1952...

[JP] John Scott had been elected mayor. Traditionally and historically South Bend is a Democratic. John Scott had just been retired from the service. In fact, he got out of the service and he decided he was gonna run for mayor on the Republican ticket. [inaudible]

He ran on the Republican ticket and was elected to mayor. He's the one that made the decision about needing more black police officers.

[DH] Really? So, Mr. Scott was sort of a...

[JP] He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the service, and he put in the time necessary to retire from the service and he did that and ran for mayor and he won that.

[DH] And he wanted to see more opportunities for African Americans here in South Bend.

0:12:10 [JP] That confounded with the fact that the white police officers we had weren't able to communicate too well with the black community. And he felt that if there were more black police officers, they'd be able to do that.

[DH] So he felt it was for the community's benefit then that we had more black police officers on the force.

[JP] I think so.

[DH] What was your first beat? What did you do when... you signed up for the police force. You mentioned that there were political overtures here... things going on in the background.

0:12:56 [JP] We went to school for fourteen weeks. We then were sworn in and were modified police officers after a fourteen-week course. My first job on the police department... I walked the beat... I worked the neighborhood... we got to know the people in the neighborhood, and that's what he wanted. To be able to say that police officers and the community got along. And they certainly did. White police officers felt that they weren't getting any cooperation. Because they talked to us, they wouldn't talk to them. So, I walked the beat for a total of fourteen years and then was promoted to a sergeant. Well, it was first a detective, then a sergeant. Detective. And I worked in the juvenile aide ward. And the next promotion was a sergeant. And then I was fortunate enough to come along... I don't know if it's fortunate or unfortunate... during the '60s, when there was plenty of activity. I received all my promotions as a result of some of those incidents.

[DH] You're talking about the civil rights movement here. Can you describe some of those incidents that happened during the '60s?

0:14:53 [JP] Well, I saw black citizens arrested for what white citizens had done in the past and received nothing—were not arrested. I don't know if you call it turning the other cheek or what, but it had been just ingrained here in South Bend. And South Bend wasn't very different from other cities. It's hard to remember back then, you know.

[DH] But you saw the black citizens of South Bend being harassed, more or less.

[JP] A lot of times they were, yes.

[DH] You walked the beat. Did that beat include like Beck's Lake or Chapin Street, or that area?

[JP] Chapin Street was my beat. It remained my beat until another black police officer came on.

[DH] Were you ever teamed up with a white police officer?

[JP] Eventually.

[DH] So both of you walked the beat then. In the 19... let's see... at the end of World War II, South Bend was a segregated community, in many ways. Like the restaurants...

[JP] Taverns.

[DH] Taverns were also segregated?

[JP] Oh yeah.

[DH] I didn't know that. What do you mean by that? There were taverns for just white people to go to?

0:16:49 [JP] Black people were segregated in restaurants... many places... you just automatically knew you couldn't go there.

[DH] And we're talking about places like the Philadelphia, perhaps?

[JP] Yes. I didn't go there. I was in high school then, but black people didn't go to the Philadelphia. Later years they could get carry-out. You know, they could order something and take it with them.

[DH] Okay. Let's go back to high school. Did you play any sports in high school?

[JP] I sure did.

[DH] What did you play?

[JP] Basketball, football, and track.

0:17:42 [DH] Okay. So, you were heavily involved in sports. Where did you go after a game? Did you go to Uncle Bill's place on Birdsell Street? Did you go the Hering House?

[JP] Both places.

[DH] Both places.

[JP] Yeah. Both places were very popular during that time. Uncle Bill had a restaurant and had a great knowledge of softball. He had a girls' softball team. Hering House was donated to the black community by Frankie Hering. I don't know if you've heard of him.

[DH] Yeah, I'm very familiar with him.

[JP] And he was a great asset. As far as we were concerned, he did a lot for us.

[DH] So, those are the places you hung out when you were a teenager?

[JP] Yeah, you couldn't hang out at Clark's Restaurant or the Philadelphia Restaurant... Downtown. There were no blacks working in the store and, later on, they would sweep and dust and do that kind of thing.

0:19:15 [DH] Dr. Lamon did an interview with Eugenia Braboy, and she was talking about being one of the first elevator operators downtown at the time.

[JP] Yeah, I'm trying to think of where she was. She was one of the first.

[DH] I think it was Penny's, but I'm not sure.

[JP] JC Penny?

[DH] Yeah.

[JP] She also, I thought she also worked at the Star Store.

[DH] Yeah, and she worked at Sears, too. She worked several places. So as a teenager you didn't go downtown very much...

[JP] Oh yeah, we went downtown. We went to the shows. First, we had to sit in the balcony at the show. We couldn't sit downstairs. Black attorney Charles Wills took the theater to court.

[DH] Do you remember which theater that was?

[JP] It's the Colfax.

[DH] The Colfax. Okay. I've heard that before.

0:20:26 [JP] I think he and approximately eleven other people went to the show and were taken to court, and the judge gave them the price of their admission back. That was their sentencing. That was it.

[DH] That, was it? Just gave them their money back?

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] Okay. So, you're now a police officer and it's the 1960s. I have this article here. This was July 27, 1967. Do you remember that incident? It was over there on Western Avenue.

[JP] I'm trying to see the name of the fellow.

[DH] It was on the 1200 block of Western Avenue. There was a shooting there. A gentleman got his... I think he was shot in the leg and ended up getting his leg amputated.

[JP] Did they give his name?

[DH] I've got a name here somewhere. Yes, Roy Cotes. This is the gentleman who was shot during that time. Now, I was talking in another interview. He was a young teenager at the time.

[JP] Cotes?

0:22:22

[DH] No, the gentleman I was talking to. And he was across the street before this incident took place. He was where it happened. Do you remember anything about this? Were you involved with this as a police officer?

[JP] I'm trying to think... what year was that?

[DH] 1967.

[JP] That's when we had the riots.

[DH] Right.

[JP] Yeah, I remember the riots because I was right in the middle of them.

[DH] Do you remember what triggered them?

[JP] Oh boy, without clippings to bring back the memory... Seems to me it had something to do with the schools. '67... I think was Riley school, I'm not sure... and Washington had their share of it. But... it's the closest this city's seen to a riot in its history. You might as well say it was a riot. The Black Stone Rangers from Chicago were brought in here and lined both

sides of the street on Colfax Street, and on the corner of Washington Street, all the way downtown.

[DH] Who were the Black Stone Rangers?

0:24:11 [JP] It was a well-known gang in Chicago. The Black Stone Rangers. Someone from South Bend recruited them to come to South Bend. They didn't become involved in any of the fighting; they stood on both sides of the street. From the heart of where the black people were, Walnut and Washington, all the way downtown. They just stood there—said nothing. But our intelligence told us who they were, and they were in fact the leaders of quite a gang.

[DH] Do you remember who brought them in?

[JP] No, I really don't.

[DH] Well how did the police officers react to this?

[JP] They became alerted to what was going on, and some of them overreacted. We did well to see to it that this thing didn't spread all over. You know, it could have spread to Mishawaka and neighboring cities. I really don't remember what group brought them in here. Just went over and talked to them and told them that things were getting out of hand in South Bend and they'd like their presence.

[DH] Do you think it was someone in the city administration?

[JP] City administration, no.

[DH] Someone within the black community, then.

[JP] Yep. Had to have been. In all probability.

0:25:51 [DH] Was there a lot of gang activity around Beck's Lake and in that area?

[JP] Uh huh. That was an offshoot of what was happening in the streets. It was spreading in Beck's Lake. Things just got out of hand. A lot of rock-throwing... name calling... it was really frightening. It really was.

[DH] How did the white police officers react to black youth during that time?

[JP] When this was going on?

[DH] Yes.

[JP] They were shocked. They were shocked. You know, this had gone on for years and the white police officers could go out and everybody would scatter. Now, in the '60s, they didn't scatter. They stood up and they fought. They were lucky that no one was killed as a result of what was happening. There was a lot of gun shots and gun fire. Yep. Those weren't the good old days.

0:27:21 [DH] So, something happened within the black community during the '50s and '60s. In the '50s, they would step aside; but in the '60s, they wouldn't?

[JP] That's about the size of it.

[DH] They'd just had enough.

[JP] Yeah. That's it. They had all they intended to take. Sometimes I don't like to talk about it.

[DH] I know. I've heard many tales. For example, when you bought your first home, did you have any trouble buying your first home? Getting a bank loan, or buying a lot?

[JP] No, because they were building for us on Beck's Lake. So that's who they catered to, were the blacks. I don't know who the outfit was that thought of building homes just for blacks, but they didn't have any trouble selling them. That whole Lake area—Beck's Lake area.

[DH] So that's where you bought your first home?

[JP] 254 North Illinois Street. I'll never forget it.

[DH] And you had no problem buying that house.

0:28:53 [JP] No. There was a black fellow here who was born and raised here. And he went into real estate. And he saw the future of sales and real estate to blacks. And he had, I don't know how many of them were built, but they were sold before they were built.

[DH] The housing was that short here—

[JP] Oh, yeah.

[DH] We needed...

[JP] Sure.

[DH] How long did you live there at Beck's Lake?

[JP] Oh... I can't remember because we left Beck's Lake and moved to various places. Trying to get away from the fights and that kind of thing. But I couldn't tell you when. It's been so long ago.

[DH] When you purchased your home over here, did you have any problem getting a loan or anything like that?

0:30:01 [JP] No. The realtors found certain people and saw a future in it. So, the realtors would get us to buy it.

[DH] So you worked with a white real estate agent when you purchased this home?

[JP] Me? Did I what?

[DH] Did you work with a white real estate agent? Or did you work with a...

[JP] Well, at that time it was 1968, and we had both white and black.

[DH] Do you think there were some benefits from the civil rights movement? Do you think that was one of the benefits?

[JP] I certainly do...

[DH] Did the movement have a positive effect on your career as a police officer? In promotions and moving up to U.S. Marshal?

[JP] I'm sure it did. Things were changing. [inaudible] change.

[DH] Yeah, okay.

0:31:20 [JP] Things were changing. And that temper at the time was what was helping me move up the ladder. I was in the right place at the right time.

[DH] How many U.S. Marshals were African American during your time?

[JP] Closest to... the total number of marshals in the United States was 94. The total number of black Americans when I was a marshal was seven.

[DH] You were a very elite group.

[JP] Yeah, it was highly unusual.

[DH] How did you get to be a U.S. Marshal?

0:32:08 [JP] I had been sort of active in the Republican Party, and as a result, the precinct committee people recommended that when there become an opening for a black United States Marshall that I be considered. So Luger, Senator Luger recommended me. And that was something. And the background they did on me was unbelievable. The FBI was charged with doing background checks on all those that were suggested to becoming marshals, and they did a background check on me—twenty-four people at first, it got as high as 250 people they interviewed. 250 people for a job.

[DH] They knew everything about you.

[JP] Oh yeah. Yeah, they sure did.

[DH] Well, evidently your background was very good.

[JP] Thank the Lord.

[DH] As... Let's go back to being a police officer here in South Bend during the 1960s.

[JP] Mm hmm.

0:33:52 [DH] Were you ever charged with investigating any of the civil rights groups? Were they ever... Did the city ever view these groups like the Black American Coalition...

[JP] I was a member of the Black American Coalition.

[DH] Okay, with Dr. Chamblee.

[JP] Yes, Dr. Chamblee. That group did a great deal... you can't tell how much good that we did...

It seemed to touch every facet of life and Dr. Chamblee... Martin Luther King had a dream, Dr. Chamblee had one—and that was to unite the black people in St. Joe County and show how much good could be done from their existence. I think Doc still... he is still well thought of in this community.

[DH] Very well thought of.

[JP] Yes he is, he should be.

0:34:58 [DH] Well, I interviewed Dr. Chamblee and he said he started the Black American Coalition because he didn't feel the NAACP was doing enough here in town. Do you remember what was going on? Do you remember... do you think... What was the NAACP doing here in town during the '60s?

[JP] Not much. They had the initials brought a lot of people's head to attention. They... the incident I was telling you about with the theater—that was the NAACP. They had... they pushed that. But Chamblee was right—not enough was being done in that area by the NAACP.

[DH] Now he organized marches and it was quite a very strong group, wasn't it?

[JP] Uh huh.

[DH] What was it... what made you want to join that group?

[JP] I never told anybody I wanted to join. I was approached and asked if I could join.

[DH] Okay.

[JP] And, uh, I said certainly.

[DH] Did you go on any of the marches?

0:36:38 [JP] Here, locally. My job kept me here, especially in the times we are talking about. There was a guy by the name of Neagu. George Neagu.

[DH] Right, we interviewed him.

[JP] Yeah, and I lost track of him. I didn't know if he was still living...

[DH] Yes, he is. He lives over by Portage and uh... he has given us many, many artifacts—newspaper clippings and things from the 1960s.

[JP] That's what I was going to tell you. He had a heck of a job.

[DH] What exactly did he do?

[JP] He was a peacemaker... and you know how that goes. But he had an office at City Hall. So, there must have been a lot of things going on that we didn't know about because great minds were meeting in different spots.

0:37:50 [DH] Uh huh. Did you ever receive any negative feedback from any of your brother police officers for participating in the civil rights movement? As far as you knew they didn't view these groups as being... what's the word I'm looking for... trouble-making groups?

[JP] You mean like the Black Stone Rangers or you talking about the NAACP?

[DH] The NAACP, the Black American Coalition... Did you ever detect any feeling from the city administration that you had to watch these groups?

0:38:30 [JP] No, you know to have been born and raised... live here all your life, you knew what was going on. You knew you were gonna be branded for walking down the street in the wrong neighborhood, you know. But no, the people I was in the NAACP with, they all wanted to promote good. They all wanted to show the white community that we too had feelings and that it was just a matter of time before things changed. Some viewed that as a threat. It wasn't a threat, it was a reality. Because of the reality, there were incidents, just like the one you showed me there—the one school thing broke out. It spilled out into the streets. It started in the schools. Black kids in the schools thought they were being treated differently and they probably were. But, uh, that eventually spilled out into the streets and there were fights all over town and we got our help from the School Corporation—the coaching staff. They knew so many of these kids so well. And we would assign coaches to a member of the NAACP and they'd stand on corner and try and talk to the kids. And it did a lot of good.

They were frustrating times. They really were. I'll never go through it again.

[DH] And what do you mean by frustrating?

0:40:38 [JP] Well, each day when you went into work you wondered if there would be a major incident. Because the talk was wide-spread across town that they weren't gonna take anymore. And by that... well you can figure out what that means.

[DH] It means police abuse? Partially?

[JP] Partially.

[DH] Lack of opportunity? Segregation?

[JP] All the things that had been going on for years.

[DH] You walked that beat. I'm very interested in the neighborhoods and the black-owned businesses. Can you recall any of the black-owned businesses on the beat that you walked?

[JP] That's all there were.

[DH] Okay.

[JP] You see, my beat was Chapin Street, and a couple years later I was switched to Walnut and Washington. These were all... Chapin Street was just about all black-owned and Walnut and Washington became the same way.

[DH] So you must have known Smoke Pierce?

[JP] Oh yes. From the time, I was a little kid.

[DH] He's very famous on Chapin Street.

0:42:12 [JP] There were people like Smoke who did things that other people didn't know about. Good things.

[DH] Uh huh.

[JP] Yeah.

[DH] I've heard that he supported things that were happening in the community but you didn't know that he did it.

[JP] That's right.

[DH] Did you ever go to the Listen Hotel or look at that? It was on Listen Street.

[JP] That was on my beat when I was walking the beat between Birdsell...

[DH] Right. So, you knew Dewey Ford had his barber shop there?

[JP] Sure. Oh yeah, a little one-room. Washington and Birdsell? And St. Augustine's eventually built the church right across the street. And then there was another church across the street in the other direction.

[DH] What about—did you remember about Mrs. Comer's? The grocery store?

[JP] Comer?

[DH] Yes.

[JP] Sure.

[DH] Do you remember what she was like?

[JP] Yeah, quiet. I'm trying to think of her husband's name. But they had a place of business on Birdsell Street. I don't know, now it seems like a little vegetable store. It was so many years ago... Uncle Bill was right down the street.

[DH] He started out at 128 Birdsell Street and then he moved across the street to 133.

[JP] 128 was when, uh, that's where I went most of the time. I don't remember him moving across the street. Across the street there was a funeral home.

0:44:12 [DH] It was... Haines was down here on the corner—it became Higgins.

[JP] Higgins was out on Washington Street.

[DH] Or did it become Woolridge? I can't remember.

[JP] No, Woolridge was on the south side.

[DH] Anyway, the funeral home was right here and then Uncle Bill's was here, and then there was a row of little businesses and up on the corner, around the corner was the Listen Hotel.

[JP] Mm Hmm.

[DH] And, uh, when he moved to 133 he actually expanded because he had rooms to rent there.

[JP] Yeah, 'cause it was just a large house.

[DH] Yeah. Were you ever called on to investigate certain parts of the civil rights movement as a police officer here in South Bend? Did they ever send you out to investigate a particular person, or a group they thought might be causing trouble?

[JP] They asked me many times if I knew certain people... but I wasn't specifically sent to investigate people.

[DH] Okay.

[JP] They probably used the FBI for that.

[DH] I hadn't thought about that. There were probably files on everybody.

[JP] Oh, sure.

[DH] Okay. As a U.S. Marshal, did you ever investigate any leaders, local civil rights people?

0:45:41

[JP] No, my work in the Marshal service was different from the work I did on the police department. It was mostly administrating. Moving people from here to California, moving people from here to anywhere in the United States. Very active. We had a different caliber of law enforcement officer at that time among the FBI than we did in small cities. I guess—of course, back then you had to be an attorney to be in the FBI. You had to graduate and most places required two years of law enforcement. Things are just so different now. It's hard to explain some of the things.

0:46:56 [DH] Do you think...

[Tape ends]